

EGYPT: Reactions to Crackdown

[] The targets of Egyptian President Sadat's crackdown on both the political left and right have labeled the referendum he plans Sunday unconstitutional and have vowed to fight back, if necessary "in the streets." The government, meanwhile, is trying to marshal popular support for the vote and may already have taken legal steps preparatory to dissolving one of Egypt's three "official" parties, the party of the left. Sadat is likely to have his way, but his course is not without danger.

[] Sadat moved forcefully against his critics on 14 May by issuing a new "corrective" to Egypt's political evolution and more rigidly defining the principles by which political parties must operate. He intends through the referendum to sideline the old guard leadership of the conservative New Wafd Party and probably to dissolve the party of the left, the National Progressive Unionist Group, as well as to suppress its newspaper *Al Ahali*. The referendum is also aimed at silencing those leftists who have opposed Sadat's restructuring of Egypt's economic and political life.

[] The referendum will give Sadat broad discretionary powers to define who is subject to prosecution. The People's Assembly is to meet on 27 May to pass a special law defining those activities that "corrupt political life."

[] The targets of Sadat's referendum apparently do not intend to give up without a fight. Hilmi Murad, the New Wafd's leader in parliament--who would probably inherit his party's leadership if the old guard were removed--said that, regardless of the vote, the New Wafd would not remove the leaders whom Sadat indicated must go.

[] The New Wafd would resist first in parliament, then in the courts, and finally in the streets if necessary according to Murad. He asserted that the government would rig the referendum and expressed the view that Sadat's crackdown would destroy the President's careful effort to build an image of Egypt as a tranquil, unified state pursuing a democratic path.

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[] The leftists also appear unwilling to acquiesce in Sadat's crackdown. The Thursday issue of *Al Ahali*, which was confiscated before distribution, has been described as highly inflammatory. The issue was signed by Khalid Muhyi al-Din, the leader of the left party and one of the few survivors--along with Sadat--of the group of officers that overthrew the monarchy in 1952.

[] Most Egyptians will probably accept Sadat's explanation that Egypt's press and politicians need to be disciplined. The targets of his attacks are few in number, represent political extremes, and are without major resources. The left and the New Wafd together hold fewer than 30 of the 360 seats in the People's Assembly.

[] Sadat's course, however, is not without danger. More politically aware Egyptians will see it as a major retreat from his most popular domestic program--political liberalization. The left and the right may be ready to force him to adopt openly repressive measures rather than allow him to maintain only a democratic facade.

[] Perhaps most important, the legendary patience of the Egyptian populace has shown signs of fraying under the burden of high prices, consumer shortages, and apprehension over Sadat's Middle East policies. Egyptian reaction if Sadat's opponents take to the streets or if it becomes apparent that the government has rigged the referendum is difficult to predict.

[] The New Wafd's popularity has not yet been tested in elections. Some observers think it is extensive and may include support from the influential Muslim Brotherhood--which has had a reputation for being prone to violence. []

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